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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 108 June, 1995

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Surangama Sutra

"Penetration Through Sound", the first of the "Twenty-five Methods of Complete Penetration", a Sunday talk given at the Ch'an Center on May 16, 1993, edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller

Kaundinya, one of the first five bhiksus, rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: "When, soon after His enlightenment, we met the Tathagata in the Mrgadava and Kukkuta Parks, I heard His voice and awakened to His teaching of the Four Noble Truths. When questioned by the Buddha, I interpreted them correctly and the Tathagata sealed my awakening by naming me Ajnata (The Wondrous Sound Is Secret and Complete). I attained Arhatship by means of sound. As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, to me sound is the best according to my personal experience."

This is the beginning of one of the best known sections of the Surangama Sutra, "Twenty-five Methods of Complete Penetration." In the paragraph above Buddha asked, "When you developed your minds to awaken to the eighteen fields of sense, which one did you regard as the best means of perfection and by what methods did you enter the state of samadhi?" Here "samadhi" and "wisdom" are the same. Furthermore, these are Mahayana samadhi and wisdom. Buddha asked his disciples, "How did you enter samadhi?" and twenty-five great practitioners each described how they cultivated enlightenment. They describe so many different methods of cultivation that we should all be able to find a method to help us attain enlightenment.

The first of the Buddha's followers to answer was Kaundinya. He was one of the Buddha's five cousins who became his first bhiksus (monks) after his enlightenment. Kaundinya was often their spokesman and he was the first disciple of the Buddha to attain Arhatship.

After the Buddha's enlightenment, he went to Mrgadava and Kukkuta Parks (the Deer Park), in a section of India now known as Sarnath, where he found Kaundinya and his other cousins. There he began teaching by explaining the Four Noble Truths to his cousins. However, Kaundinya did not attain enlightenment because he listened to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. It was because he heard Buddha's voice. The voice of the Buddha, not the understand-

ing of his words, caused Kaundinya to realize the Four Noble Truths. There is a difference. Later Buddha asked him to demonstrate his understanding, affirmed it, and gave him the name Ajnata. The Buddha said that Kaundinya had fully and completely received the meaning and the significance of sound.

Kaundinya had attained Complete Penetration through sound. What does "Complete Penetration" mean? It means that when you have entered through one Dharma door, you can enter through any Dharma door. In other words, when you thoroughly realize one aspect of the Dharma, then you understand all Dharma completely.

Now that I have explained the general meaning of this paragraph, I will explore it in more detail, beginning with the story of the five bhiksus. Shakyamuni, who became the Buddha, was a prince from a small kingdom in India. After he left home to become an ascetic in

decided to follow his example.

After six years of ascetic practice, Shakyamuni realized that his austere practices were no help in answering the questions of suffering and death which set him upon his original journey. He

accepted an offering of porridge cooked with goat's milk, something that would normally be eschewed by ascetics. When he acted in this manner, his five cousins thought he had abandoned his ideals and they left him. Two went to the Deer Park and the others went elsewhere. Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood in Bodh-Gaya, near Bodh-Gaya in modern Bihar, India. Bodh-Gaya and the Deer Park are quite far from one another. When we were in India a few years ago, it took us a day and a half to go from Bodh-Gaya to the Deer Park by bus. Buddha walked from Bodh-Gaya to the Deer Park in order to teach his five cousins who had



"Arhat" by Lawrence Waldron

search of enlightenment, his father, the king, was alarmed and upset. He sent five of his cousins to talk him into returning home. However, when they reached Shakyamuni and saw him and understood what he was seeking, they were so moved that, instead of bringing him home, they

reunited there, and they became his first five bhiksus.

The name Kaundinya means "fire worshipper" or "fire vehicle." Either Kaundinya had belonged to a fire-worshipping religion at one time, or his

name was traditional in his family. Only Kaundinya attained Arahatship the first time the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. In fact, when he heard the sound of the Buddha's voice, he attained Arahatship. When the Buddha questioned him, he was able to explain the meaning of the Four Noble Truths on three levels, which correspond to the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths. Kaundinya was extraordinary. The Buddha's other cousins attained Arahatship later, and even that was extraordinary. To truly attain Arahatship, one must realize the Four Noble Truths on the three levels, as Kaundinya did. I have been listening to the teachings of the Four Noble Truths from the time I was a child and have tried to convey those teachings to others, yet I have still not attained Arhatship.

The Four Noble Truths describe suffering, the causes of suffering, the possibility of the extinction of suffering, and the path leading to the extinction of suffering. Although Buddha explained them in this order, the sequence in which we come to know them is suffering, cause of suffering, path, and extinction of suffering. The Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths three times, at three levels, for his disciples. These explanations are called the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths. In the first Turning, the Buddha explained each of the Four Noble Truths: first, suffering is the reality of life; second, the cause of suffering is karma, which results from our self-centered actions in this and previous lives; third, it is possible to end suffering; and fourth, if we wish to end suffering we must cultivate the Eight fold Path. The Eight fold Path is right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. All of the Buddha's teachings are included in the Four Noble Truths, so of course we should all realize enlightenment after hearing them.

The Second Turning of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths was a repetition and affirmation of what the Buddha had already said. In the Second Turning Buddha said that, first, we should know that life is suffering; second, we should know the cause of suffering; third, we should know that suffering should be terminated; and fourth, we should know what the Path which terminates suffering is, and we should cultivate that Path. Thus Buddha repeated what he had said in the First Turning for those of us who are not so quick to learn, saying in effect, "Make sure you know this, make sure you know that."

In the Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths the Buddha made a final affirmation. He said, "I know what suffering is. I have terminated the cause of suffering. I have cultivated the Path terminating the cause of suffering. I have attained Nirvana." Buddha described his own realization, but what he said is true of anyone who attains Arhatship. An Arhat has ended all vexations and is free from birth and death. By virtue of hearing the Buddha's voice, no sooner was Kaundinya on the first level than he was ready to go to the third. It is for this reason that Arahats are often called "self-hearers" - they attain realization just in hearing the Buddha's words.

We use "suffering" to translate the Sanskrit term dukkha. "Suffering" is not as all encompassing as dukkha but it is the English word which is closest. But what is dukkha, or suffering?

Answer from the audience: Pain caused by not having our desires met.

That is true, but it is not far-reaching enough. The very existence of life causes suffering. Whenever there is life there is seeking, or desire, so if you say that suffering is caused by desire that is not incorrect. But most directly put, the existence of life is suffering. For anyone who is

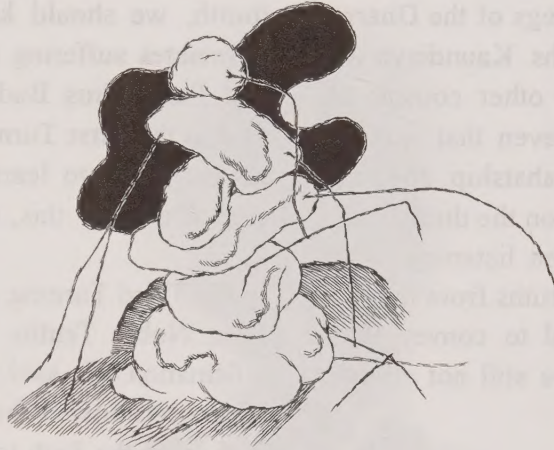
not liberated in the Buddhist sense, birth and death are suffering. But for anyone who is liberated, birth and death are not suffering. Those who have attained the liberation of Hinayana Arhatship will no longer experience suffering. But since they understand that life, itself, is suffering they do not want to accept the cycle of birth and death again. The Hinayana practitioner, and the Hinayana Arhat, would like both body and mind to escape the cycle of birth and death.

Mahayana practitioners and Bodhisattvas have a different perspective. They believe that as long as your mind is free of attachments and desires, your mind is liberated. If your mind is liberated, it does not matter whether your body is in the midst of birth and death. Liberation is a matter of the mind for the Mahayana practitioner. Liberation does not mean that the body will no longer be susceptible to karma, but if your mind has no attachments, you will not be limited by birth and death. You do not have to go beyond birth and death in order to attain liberation.

Many people recognize the greatness of the idea of the compassionate Mahayana Bodhisattva, who does not leave behind birth and death but stays in samsara to help sentient beings. Conceptually, it is easy to adhere to the Mahayana teaching that if you have no attachments it is not necessary to leave this world behind. However when people encounter real vexations and suffering, they usually try to run away from them. When the Chinese Communists took over the whole of China in 1949, many Buddhists, including left home people (monks and nuns), tried to flee. They went from northern China to the south, and then to

Hong Kong. Some decided that Hong Kong wasn't safe enough, and they went to the United States or other foreign countries. Master Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud) was among the people who left China. In Hong Kong he decided that he had to go back to China. When people asked him why

he said, "The situation in mainland China is so bad that Buddhism may soon disappear. If I do not go back, it will only get worse, so I have to go back." Of the Buddhists who ran away from Communist rule, who among them were true Mahayana practitioners?



drawing by Giora Carmi

During the Sung Dynasty,

China was overrun by fierce Mongolians, who killed and burned as they went. About 500 monks from a large monastery decided to leave to escape from them, but one Master decided to stay. When the others asked him why he would not run away, he said, "If the Mongolians do not have anyone to kill they will be angry." When the Mongolians arrived, they found the monastery completely empty except for the Master. The Mongolian general said, "Why are you still here? There must be something wrong with you." The Master said, "It is the monks who left who have something wrong with them. They were afraid, and I am not afraid." The general asked, "Why didn't you leave?" and the Master replied, "If we all ran away and you did not have anyone to kill, you might burn down the monastery. Now maybe you will leave the monastery alone."

If your house were on fire, would you try to escape or stay inside? Of course, you would try to escape. To die in the fire would not be particularly intelligent. If the door were blocked, you would try the window. However, if you thought

you could put the fire out, you would stay and try to save your home. Also, people can be killed if they stampede during a fire and think only of themselves. Someone who is liberated would think about how best to help others no matter what the danger to himself, because he has no concept of a separate self. He might send someone to call the fire department, and calmly help everybody else to escape.

This morning I read an article concerning why Buddhism disappeared from India, some 700 or 800 years ago. At that time only Hinayana Buddhism existed, exhibiting an attitude towards life decidedly more negative than that of Mahayana. Hinayana Buddhists wanted to escape human existence, so they did not contribute to Indian society as a whole. When practitioners want only to free themselves from this world of suffering, and are not interested in helping other sentient beings, anyone who joins the Buddhist community does not contribute to society. When the Muslims overran India, the Hindus resisted and maintained their religion and some of their social structure. The Buddhists, on the other hand, ran away. The Muslim invaders followed them and eventually all the Indian Buddhists were killed or died out.

In China the Mahayana tradition helped Buddhism survive periods of persecution. Sometimes Buddhism was wiped out in the cities, but it survived in the mountains. When it was destroyed in the mountains, it still survived among the common people. Whenever the persecution abated, Buddhism always reappeared and grew strong again. According to the article I read, because Mahayana Buddhists have always been willing to be involved in the world for the benefit of others, Buddhism has not disappeared from China.

Now let us return to the text. We were talking about Kaundinya's realization. Buddha gave him the name "Ajnata," which means "the Wondrous

Sound Is Secret (or Esoteric) and Complete." The "Secret" is secret only to those who have not attained realization. "Complete" refers, first, to Kaundinya as Arhat, who no longer has anything to accomplish and for whom birth and death hold no suffering, and second, to those who are not enlightened but who will witness the enlightened manifestation of wisdom and compassion in him, and will thus see him as "complete." The Surangama Sutra is a Mahayana Sutra, and in Mahayana Buddhism wisdom is always associated with compassion, so after attaining Mahayana Arhatship Kaundinya manifested complete wisdom and compassion for all sentient beings.

In the Ch'an tradition there are many examples of practitioners who became enlightened through sound, even in modern times. One evening when Master Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud, 1840 - 1959) was practicing in the meditation hall, the person serving tea burned him as he poured hot water into his cup. Master Hsu Yun dropped the cup, and when he heard the sound it made as it broke, he had an enlightenment experience.

To become enlightened through sound may seem easy, but Kaundinya practiced diligently as a follower of Shakyamuni for six years before he realized enlightenment. Master Hsu Yun left home to devote himself to practice when he was nineteen and did not have the experience I described until he was fifty-six, thirty-seven years later. If we practice as hard as Kaundinya did, and have the good fortune to meet a Buddha, no doubt we, too, can realize enlightenment through sound. Otherwise we may have to be at least as patient as Master Hsu Yun. I am in my sixties now, and if I practice patiently for the next thirty-seven years I will be 100 years old. Most of you are younger than I. Do not waste your chance. It is important to practice diligently. Put down your attachments and use your method. When we do that, enlightenment can be simple.

News from the Ch'an Center:

In Taiwan, Master Sheng-yen transmitted the Bodhisattva Precepts to over 1000 lay practitioners between Feb. 6 and Feb. 12. The traditional Bodhisattva Precepts include ten major and 48 minor precepts. Master Sheng-yen has found that many practitioners try to follow the letter of these precepts, but do not understand the underlying principles of the precepts. After extensive study of the vinaya, he decided to transmit the Three Pure Precepts and the ten virtues in the form of Ten Virtuous Precepts as Bodhisattva Precepts. The Pure Precepts are: "Give up all evil deeds", "Cultivate all virtuous qualities", and "Deliver all sentient beings."

On Feb. 17 through 19 Master Sheng-yen gave three nights of talks at the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall in Taiwan. Over 3000 people attended each night, and on the last night 1000 people formally became Buddhists by taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Master Sheng-yen organized a "Cleaning Day" in Taiwan through the local branches of the Nung Ch'an Monastery. Participants were asked to consider three ideas: that we should be frugal with what we have received, that we should nourish our good fortune and blessings, and that we should be compassionate and create good for all beings. Over 10,000 people took part in cleaning their streets, parks and neighborhoods.

On March 18 about fifteen people helped with spring cleaning at the Center. The floors of the main hall and basement were cleaned and waxed, the garden was cared for and the fence was painted. We'd like to especially thank David Wu for his ongoing help.

On March 26 Stuart Lachs lectured at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, on behalf of the Center.

Guo-gu Shih represented the Center at a panel discussion about religion at N.Y.U. on April 5. The panel was sponsored by Asian Pride and included Buddhist, Hindu and Christian speakers.

The on-going Friday Ch'an Sitting Group led by Guo Chou Shih, Guo-gu Shih and Stuart Lachs has been a great success, and we will continue to offer it when Shih-fu is away.

Guo-gu Shih conducted a meditation workshop at Cooper Union on April 15, at the invitation of the Meditation Circle of Cooper Union.

On April 20 Master Sheng-yen lectured on "Stabilizing the Body and Mind" to over 1000 people in



cleaning outside the garden at the
Ch'an Center

Vancouver, Canada. The talk was organized by the local Dharmapala organization for its members and the Chinese speaking community.

On April 21 over fifty people came to the Center for the biennial Dharma Gathering for Master Sheng-yen's English speaking students and friends. Master Sheng-yen spoke on "Ch'an in America," and discussed the problems caused by the way Zen was first presented here. At that time enlightenment was emphasized, rather than practice and the views taught by Buddha. Master Sheng-yen said that although he sometimes talks about enlightenment, he emphasizes understanding, methods of practice and applying practice and understanding to daily life. He added that when the causes are right, you do not have to worry about fruition (enlightenment). A discussion about practice and ways to spread the Dharma followed.

On April 22 Master Sheng-yen was invited to speak at Wainwright House in Rye, New York on the subject of "Attachment and Transformation."

On April 23 Master Sheng-yen gave a public talk at the Center on "Ch'an — Illuminating the Mind and Seeing Self-Nature." He spoke about three main practices which help us to illuminate the mind and see our self-nature. The first is to study under a knowledgeable adviser. The second is to practice repentance, especially for ignorance, arrogance and jealousy. The third is to always examine your mental state. Be aware of your responses when you deal with others, especially the problem of giving rise to negative thoughts. Also pay close attention to your actions of body, speech and mind, both when meditating and in daily life.

On April 25 Master Shen-yen spoke before Professor Kenneth G. Zysk's class at N.Y.U. on "Ch'an Practice and Realization."



Friday Night Ch'an Sitting Group

Upcoming Events:

One-day Sitting Meditation: July 8, 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.

Beginning Meditation Workshops: Saturday June 3 and Saturday July 29. In English, 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese, 2:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M.

Tricycle Magazine's second annual "Change Your Mind Day", Sat. June 3 in Central Park. A day of meditation instruction and other activities. Please call Tricycle at 1-800-950-7008.

Wednesday Night Ch'an Sitting Group for Chinese speaking people — July 12, 7:00 to 9:00

The Friday Night Ch'an Sitting Group, in English, will resume on July 14 from 7:00 to 9:00

On Saturday July 22 our annual outing will take place from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. at an as yet undetermined location. All are welcome.

Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

Recitation Group: Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

Group Meditation: Tues. and Thurs. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M.

Ch'an Sitting Group: Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

Sunday Program: Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

First Saturday of each month: One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call to register.

Last Saturday of each month: Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

Special Announcement:

The Ch'an Center is hosting two seminars on Hua-yen Buddhism and its interrelationship with Ch'an:

June 9 and 10: Professor Robert M. Gimello

"The Meaning of the Hua-yen Trinity and Master Ch'en-kuan's Approach to the Hua-yen (Avatamsaka) Sutra"

June 16 and 17: Professor Peter Gregory

"Hua-yen, Ch'an and Tsung-mi"

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